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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [OIIP](#) [KPAO](#) [SL](#)

SUBJECT: "COCAINE SAGA" TOPIC OF GOVERNMENT PRESS CONFERENCE

¶1. Summary: At a press conference on July 17, members of cabinet of the GoSL as well as top-level law enforcement officers lauded their own handling of the plane that landed July 13 at Lungi airport carrying a large quantity of cocaine. The Minister of Information confirmed the detention of 17 individuals at the Pademba Road prison, of which 11 are foreign nationals. The Minister of Transportation admitted that one of the arrested suspects, is his brother, but denied any involvement. End summary.

¶2. In his opening remarks, Minister of Information and Communications Alhaji I. B. Kargbo reaffirmed the GoSL's commitment to pursuing the issue of the plane and its illicit cargo and urged the public to support the government's efforts. He claimed to have visited the Pademba Road prison earlier in the day and confirmed the detention of 17 individuals in connection with the case, 11 of whom are foreign nationals. Kargbo expressed his intention to read out the names and nationalities of the foreign nationals, but was discouraged by the Office of National Security (ONS) Coordinator, Retired Brigadier Kelly Conteh.

¶3. Conteh claimed that his ONS had been "collecting intelligence and making several presentations to the authorities" regarding drug trafficking in the country, and was therefore unsurprised by the incident. He attributed the rate at which investigations have progressed to their prior knowledge of those involved in the drug trade locally.

¶4. Conteh said he is not worried about Sierra Leone being "blacklisted" for drug trafficking because the government has demonstrated the will to investigate and pursue the matter to its conclusion. He affirmed the government's commitment to "get down to the bottom" of it and take appropriate action. Finally, he said that President Koroma has issued the Military Aid to Civilian Power (MACP) directive to help the security agencies investigate. As a result, military personnel have been deployed at the airport on the tarmac, around the perimeter, and near the consignment.

¶5. The Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Zainab Bangura, also said she was not surprised by the incident, as there have been many such incidents around the subregion, including a recent seizure of cocaine worth half a billion dollars in Liberia. She said she has been in communication with other governments in the region to collaborate on how best to proceed and to ensure that any cross-border fugitives are apprehended.

¶6. Bangura said that the international community have lauded the GoSL for their handling of the matter, saying she has not received any indications of negative action against the country as a result of the incident. She praised the international response as swift and helpful, and called the incident a "blessing in disguise" because it may allow Sierra Leone to help other countries overcome their challenges in terms of drug trafficking.

¶7. Bangura also said that many international security agencies have arrived in the country to monitor the government's handling of the situation, adding that some may be spies for the drug runners. She did not specifically confirm the presence of an FBI team, but rather

said "FBI, CIA, you name it." (Comment: Embassy cannot verify the Foreign Minister's claims. End Comment)

¶8. Assistant Inspector General of Police for Crime Services Francis Munu said the police have collected sensitive information regarding the incident, but refused to disclose it on the grounds that it would compromise the investigation. He said three more Venezuelans were arrested last night, bringing the total number of foreigners arrested to 11. He said several other people were invited for questioning and released but could be helpful to the prosecutions during the trial phase.

¶9. Munu confirmed that an international drug trafficking organization is operating in the country. He said that the SLP has discovered that the vehicle used by the traffickers was not properly registered. He reaffirmed the government's commitment to pursue the matter, and shared assurances from INTERPOL of their support. Finally, he said the police have refrained from indiscriminately arresting people to avoid affecting Sierra Leone's international image.

¶10. Transport and Aviation Minister Kemoh Sesay said the plane landed forcefully and without authorization. He said the airport staff switched off the lights to try to prevent it from landing, but the plane's crew landed anyway. He said he specifically recommended to the President that the consignment be handled by an international body because Sierra Leoneans generally distrust the police/security agencies. He admitted that one of the arrested suspects, Ahmed Sesay, is his brother, but denied responsibility for his brother's actions.